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SUBJECT: SERBIA: ALBANIANS ON NATIONAL BALLOT

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SUMMARY

¶1. Ethnic Albanian parties from southern Serbia gathered enough signatures to put them on Serbia's May 11 parliamentary ballot. Albanian participation had been at risk after the Serbian authorities increased the number of signatures necessary for minority party registration from 3,000 to 10,000. In the end they were able to collect the requisite number of signatures only with the assistance of NGOs and other parties. Clear USG messages and pressure from Pristina and Tirana were critical in encouraging electorate participation and, apparently, averting a boycott. With Kosovo independence as a backdrop, Albanian participation in Serbia's elections is a significant accomplishment. End Summary.

Albanians on Ballot (With Help)

¶2. The Coalition of Presevo Valley Albanians from southern Serbia gathered more than the requisite 10,000 signatures and will appear on the ballot in the May 11 parliamentary elections.

This was a remarkable accomplishment, considering the government more than tripled the signature requirement from 3,000 in the 2007 elections. The coalition, led by incumbent Member of Parliament Riza Halimi (Party for Democratic Action -- PVD), received significant support from NGOs, ethnic Hungarians and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The U.S. NGO National Democratic Institute (NDI), in particular, assisted the Coalition's outreach and logistical efforts to collect the large number of signatures. On April 23, two NGOs, Civic Initiatives and Center for Cultural Decontamination, sponsored a Belgrade-based initiative to collect signatures. Halimi confirmed to poloff on April 25 that the Coalition had secured placement on the national ballot and conveyed his thanks to the Embassy and U.S.-assistance partners for their "valuable support."

Broad Coalition, No Boycott

13. The Coalition includes members of all major Albanian parties, and even those not on the list said they would not boycott the effort. Halimi leads the list and outgoing Bujanovac Mayor Nagip Arifi (PVD) is second. In a reversal from 2007 elections, hardliner Jonuz Musliu (Movement for Democratic Progress -- LPD) is participating. Presevo Mayor Ragmi Mustafa's Party for Democratic Albanians (PDSh) is not part of the coalition but assured the Ambassador on April 8 that his party would not boycott the elections. In fact, a splinter group of the PDSh in Presevo led by party rival Nasir Aziri has joined the Coalition. Skender Destani, who ran with Halimi in 2007, is not in the coalition but has called on Albanians to vote for the list. An OSCE official in Bujanovac, Shera Abdili, told poloff on April 29 that locals "were now focused on local elections" and there was "no sense" of opposition to the national list. In addition, Abdili said, concurrent local elections will boost participation by Presevo Valley Albanians.

"Critical" Pressure

14. Public and private messages to participate from Albania, Kosovo, and the United States made a difference. OSCE Representative in Southern Serbia Martin Brooks told poloff on April 29 that Kosovo Albanian Ramush Haradinaj's influence was "critical" to Musliu and other hardliners' decision to participate -- or at least not boycott. Musliu's decision to join the list followed his meeting with Haradinaj in Pristina and Haradinaj's April 15 public comments urging Presevo Valley Albanians to participate. Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha

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on April 1 called publicly for participation. The Ambassador made support for Albanians' participation in Serbian elections a central theme of his public and private messages during his April 8-9 visit to Presevo and Bujanovac.

COMMENT

15. This is a major success for multi-ethnic democracy in Serbia in the face of long odds. Halimi and other moderates had been concerned that their efforts to get on the national ballot would prove futile and needlessly divert party resources from local elections. Instead, Halimi now heads a diverse coalition and improves his standing as the key representative for Presevo Valley Albanians in Belgrade and to the international community. The coalition will likely win one seat and return Halimi to parliament where he is well respected among his colleagues and has done a good job representing his constituents. Thanks to support from Tirana and Pristina -- and the lack of a boycott -- winning two seats is now within reach. End Comment.

BRUSH